

Surviving Reality Television

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

by

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Abstract

This paper covers a brief history and explanation of reality television programming by attempting to answer questions like the following: Where did reality television start? What are the basic elements of reality television programming?

The body of the paper includes an evaluation of the summer 2000 reality television show Survivor, including a breakdown of the ratings for Survivor, ratings for other popular television series, and an analysis of the producer's promotional approach for the show.

The following topics are also addressed: Who are the characters in Survivor and how were they portrayed? What post-production, editing techniques were used in Survivor and what purpose did they serve? What messages were communicated? In what ways is Survivor an accurate representation of reality? In what ways is Survivor a distortion of reality? Finally, this paper offers an explanation for the popularity of reality television programming and an evaluation of the impact of reality television.

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Television is a popular and powerful medium that both imitates and influences culture. For many people, television is a primary source of information and entertainment. It is a window into a different world—an opportunity to view people, places, and things that we may not have experienced first hand. In an increasingly global society, television shapes society's perception of the world.

The media put our environment in perspective by giving its many aspects various meaning and explanations. They help establish our agendas by giving us things to think and talk about; they help us become socialized into our communities and political systems and to participate in change when necessary; and they help us cope with or escape from life's realities in a wide variety of ways. In short, the greater our need to belong, to understand, and to cope, the greater our reliance on the mass media. From this, it follows that the media must have some pervasive influences on our thoughts, beliefs, values, and even our behavior. (Weimann 3)

Media analysis, therefore, is an integral part of understanding society. Television is arguably the most pervasive mass medium because it combines sound and pictures and no skills are necessary to watch. The viewer does not necessarily need to know how to read, for example, in order to understand television. For years, media researchers have studied the impact of television on society.

In recent television history, the advent of what is commonly called "reality television" has re-ignited a long-standing debate: Does television represent reality or create false realities? The term "reality television" is most commonly used to describe

entertainment programming starring or about ordinary people. The term applies to many types of programming; some forms of reality television have been around for many years (Cops, America's Funniest Home Videos, Rescue 911, etc...). Recently, however, reality shows have developed into a different type of programming. In most cases, ordinary people audition to participate in manipulated, human experiment situations. MTV's Real World, for example, which debuted in 1991, was one of the first of these types of shows. In Real World, seven people are selected through an audition process to live in a house together and be videotaped for six months. The opening of every episode includes the mission of the show: "to find out what happens when people stop being polite and start getting real."

The year 2000 brought an explosion of new reality shows, beginning with the summer 2000, CBS hit show Survivor. In Survivor, sixteen people are selected to go to an island with less than the basic necessities, compete in physical challenges against one another, and vote one another off the island until there is one person left. The last person left wins a million-dollar prize. A number of similar reality shows, probably influenced by the massive success of Survivor, debuted in the fall of 2001.

Every season, an entirely new line up of reality shows appears; this new trend in television programming brings to light some interesting questions. The term "reality television" suggests that these shows are a representation of reality. How accurately do reality shows represent reality? Where did reality programming come from, and how has it developed over the years? Finally, instead of trying to analyze every new reality show, this paper will focus on Survivor. Is Survivor a realistic portrayal of reality or does it reshape the public's view of the real world?

In order to completely understand reality television, it is helpful to examine the origins of this type of programming. The availability of consumer video cameras has played a significant role in the development of reality television.

Beginning in the late 1960s, video cameras became available to the public. Since then, consumer video cameras have steadily become smaller, more portable, less expensive, and closer to broadcast quality. According to Deirdre Boyle in her essay "Guerilla Television", "[portable] video's advent launched an alternative television movement in the 1970s." Boyle refers to this movement as "guerilla television" (D'Agostino 153). Suddenly, everyday citizens were both intentionally and accidentally capturing all kinds of events on tape. Dee Dee Halleck adds a further insight to our understanding of this movement:

As consumer video became increasingly portable and inexpensive in the 1980s, amateurs, activists, and grass roots collectives began using camcorders and VCRs to document demonstrations, marches, and events; to monitor police brutality; and to create their own programs for educational and organizing purposes and for distribution on local and national cable access television. (170)

Perhaps partly in response to the consumer video revolution, commercial television has seen many changes over the past three decades. According to Mark Fishman and Gary Cavender, American television "has been moving steadily toward more tabloid like programming since the early 1970s." Fishman and Cavender suggest that this trend began with the popularity of sensational or "action news" in the late 1970s. Then, in the early to mid 1980s, television talk shows like Donahue, Heraldo, and Oprah became popular. Also, in the late 1980s, reality crime programs like America's Most Wanted, Unsolved Mysteries, and Cops were tremendously popular (12). Americas

Funniest Home Videos—which debuted in 1989—devoted an entire show to the ordinary person's home video footage (cute kids doing silly things, bloopers at weddings and family events, etc...) I Witness Video was another show that showcased video by home video users. Every episode began with a comment from the host about the possibilities associated with the "video revolution". The show reminded viewers that the camcorder allowed ordinary people to create television programming (D'Agostino 167).

Many similarities can be drawn between reality television and the documentary. Shows like Real World and Survivor are also surprisingly similar to the direct-video form of the documentary. Direct-video documentaries are documentaries in which the camera serves as a silent witness; usually there is little or no scripted narration. Instead, the documentary is edited in such a way that the subjects become the narrators. Many times, reality shows are deceptively presented as documentary. In fact, MTV's official website describes Real World as a "documentary soap opera."

There are many similarities between the direct-video documentary and the new form of reality television. Both forms of programming reject the use of scripts, and the subjects are ordinary people as opposed to actors. In addition, both the documentary and reality television often allow the audience to witness situations that are not normally viewed on television (real people fighting, raw emotional responses by the subjects, etc.). Finally, many critics of reality television argue that voyeurism is the motivation behind the popularity of shows like Real World. The same voyeuristic element is often involved in both reality television and the documentary. For example, a viewer might get the same voyeuristic feeling watching an emotional exchange between cast members in Real World as one would watching a documentary with undercover footage of an employee

violating health code in a restaurant. The similarities between the documentary and reality television, however, are better illustrated through actual examples.

In 1973, documentarian Craig Gilbert produced a direct-video style documentary entitled An American Family. It was a twelve-part PBS series about a married couple from Santa Barbara, California and their five children. William and Patricia Loud agreed to allow camera crews to tape their family over the course of about seven months. According to Hal Himmelstein, "An American Family...explored the reality behind the myth of the suburban middle landscape." The Loud family lived in a nice house with a swimming pool in the suburbs; however, the documentary revealed some serious problems beneath the surface (alcohol abuse, infidelity, grudges between family members, etc.). Finally, William and Patricia's eldest son Lance was homosexual, which caused even more discord (Himmelstein 280).

MTV's Real World is an excellent example of reality television that is strikingly similar to direct-video documentary. Like An American Family, some of the same raw emotions and relationship and homosexuality issues surface in Real World. Also, both shows incorporate the same principle of watching people's everyday lives to find some kind of meaning. According to the opening credits of Real World, the theme is "to see what happens when people stop being polite and start getting real." In An American Family, the theme is to find the reality behind the materialism of the American lifestyle. The major difference between the two shows, of course, is that Real World is a manipulated situation; complete strangers from different places are chosen to live in a house. Therefore, Real World is a far less realistic representation of reality than is An American Family.

The term "reality television" or "reality TV" is being used more and more frequently to describe television programming; however, it is difficult to define reality television as a genre because it appears in so many different forms. As M.S. Mason suggests, "It's everywhere—game shows, daytime talk shows, 'amazing' home videos, wild-animal attacks, and Cops. Reality TV comes unscripted, actor-free, usually video taped and highly edited. One form or another of it is on most channels everyday of the week" (Mason).

In the past year, the term "reality television" has been used to describe a specific brand of television show. It is a new version of reality television that often follows a specific formula. Indeed, many names have been given to recently popular reality shows like Survivor, Big Brother, and Temptation Island. Survivor producer Mark Burnett prefers to call his show "dramality programming," a term that combines "drama" and "reality" (Mason). James Poniewozik, however, calls the genre VTV for voyeur television (Poniewozik). Many media reviewers describe Survivor as a cross-section between Real World and Who Wants to Be a Millionaire (ABC's hit game show hosted by Regis Philbin). In fact, the million-dollar prize in Survivor incorporates a game show element that was not formerly associated with reality television. Finally, like Real World, Survivor has a human experiment component. The idea is to find out what happens to people in a tough situation. Producers seem to be testing the audience to see how far they can go with reality television. In Survivor, for example, the object is to push people to the limits of survival and catch it on tape.

In order to better understand this new form of reality television, it is useful to examine an example program. The following section of this paper concentrates on an

analysis of the summer 2000 hit show Survivor. It was the first of the new reality shows to become massively popular, and the show's popularity inspired a number of similar shows the following season.

Sixteen of six thousand applicants were chosen to be cast members for Survivor (Mason). The sixteen people chosen were separated into two groups. The first group included the following people: Sonya—a 63 year-old musician from California, Stacey—a 27 year-old lawyer from California, Dirk—a 24 year-old dairy farmer from Wisconsin, Sean—a 30 year-old neurologist from New York, Susan—a 38 year-old truck driver from Wisconsin, Rudy—a 72 year-old former Navy SEAL from Virginia Beach, Kelly—a 23 year-old river guide from Nevada, and Richard—a 39 year-old corporate trainer from Rhode Island. The second group consisted of the following people: B.B.—a 64 year-old retired contractor from California, Ramona—a 29 year-old chemist from New Jersey, Jenna—a 22 year old student from New Hampshire, Gervase—a 30 year-old youth basketball coach from Pennsylvania, Colleen—a 23 year-old student from Florida, Joel—a 28 year-old salesman from Arkansas, Gretchen—a 38 year-old home-maker from Tennessee, and Greg—a 24 year-old Brown University graduate from Colorado (Lynch 50-55).

The two groups set up separate camps on different sides of a small island in the South China Sea. Ten camera crews taped the cast members' daily activities 24 hours a day for 39 days (March 13th to April 20th, 2000). Then, the highlights of each week were edited on sight (Mason). Contestants were provided with a meager amount of rice and canned goods, one blanket, a string, sunscreen, and a map to find fresh water (Lynch 50-55).

Every three days, the teams competed in “immunity challenges”, which were usually tests of physical strength. The losing team had to attend a “tribal council” meeting where they were required to vote against one person in their group. The winning team received “immunity,” meaning that they did not have to vote out anyone in their group. When there were only two people remaining, the final seven contestants were called back to vote and decide the million-dollar winner. Finally, immediately following the highly promoted Survivor “Finale”, Bryant Gumble hosted a one-hour reunion show with all of the cast members.

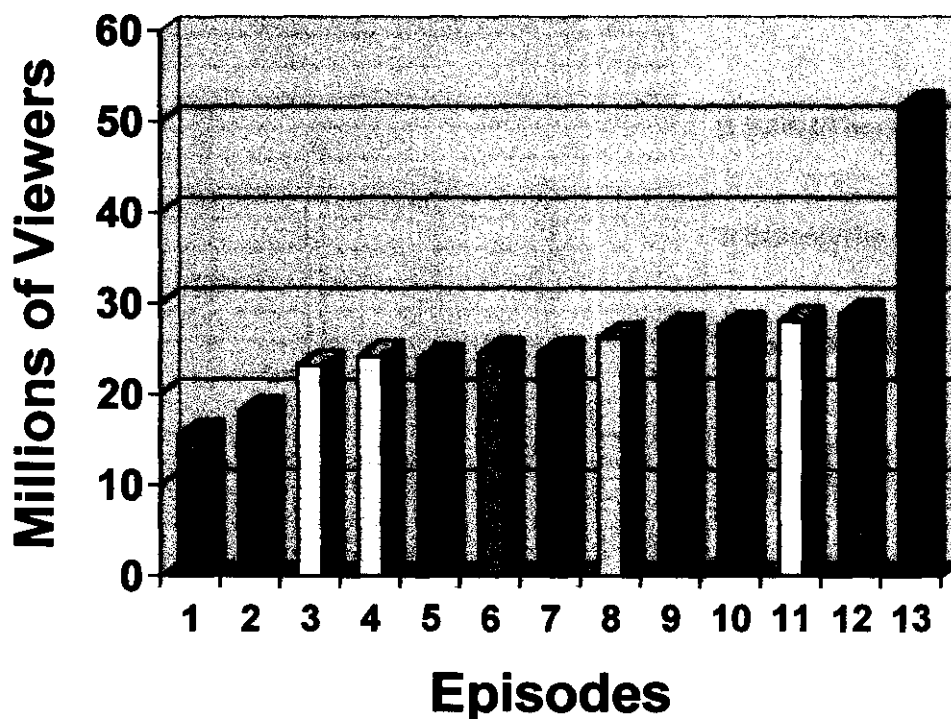
Survivor achieved extraordinary ratings for a first-season, summer program. Each new episode showed a slight increase in ratings, and the audience for the Survivor “Finale” on August 23rd was almost twice the size of the audience for the Survivor premiere on May 31st. Chart 1 (p 9) displays the Nielson ratings for each episode of Survivor.

The final episode of Survivor was CBS’s highest rated telecast since the 1994 Winter Olympics figure skating finals with Nancy Kerrigan and Tanya Harding (Kissell). In addition, Survivor is now the highest rated summer series in television history (Levin). Even the Survivor “Finale”, however, did not come close to topping some of the highest rated long-running series of past years. Chart 2 (p10) displays Nielson Media Research’s top five most popular episodes in television history compared to the Survivor “Finale”.

In fact, there have been many higher rated shows in recent years. Chart 3 (p 11) displays various other top rated shows compared with the Survivor final episode. It is important to remember that the shows in Chart 3 were long-running series. Survivor, on the other hand, was a summer series that peaked after only twelve episodes.

Chart 1

Audience Viewership of Survivor by Episode

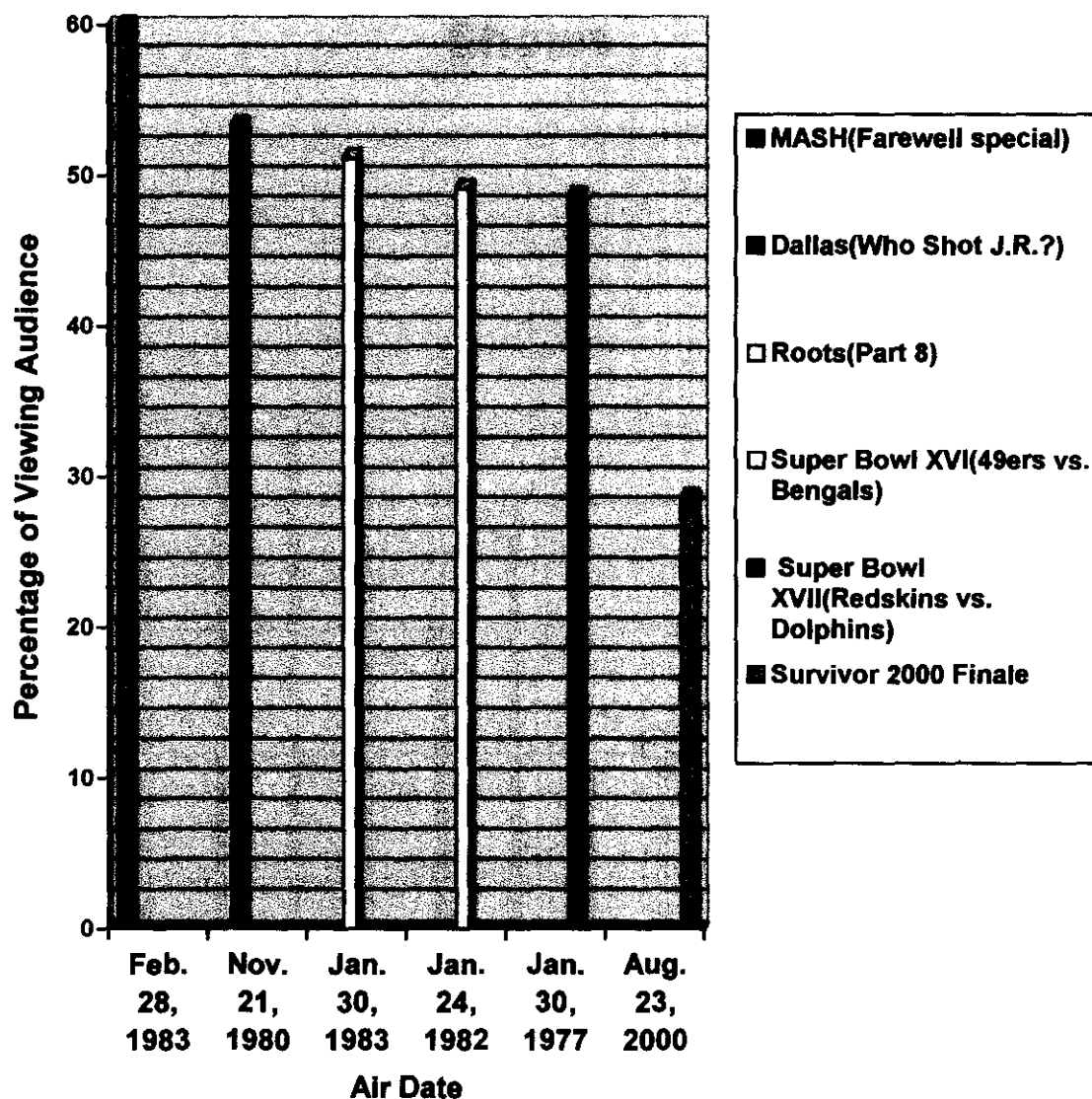


■ Episode 1(May 31,2000)	■ Episode 2(June 7,2000)
□ Episode 3(June 14,2000)	□ Episode 4(June 21,2000)
■ Episode 5(June 28,2000)	■ Episode 6(July 5,2000)
■ Episode 7(July 12,2000)	□ Episode 8(July 19,2000)
■ Episode 9(July 26,2000)	■ Episode 10(Aug. 2,2000)
□ Episode 11(Aug. 9,2000)	■ Episode 12(Aug. 16,2000)
■ Episode 13(Aug. 23,2000)	

Sources: (Sigesmund 54-58; Kissell)

Chart 2

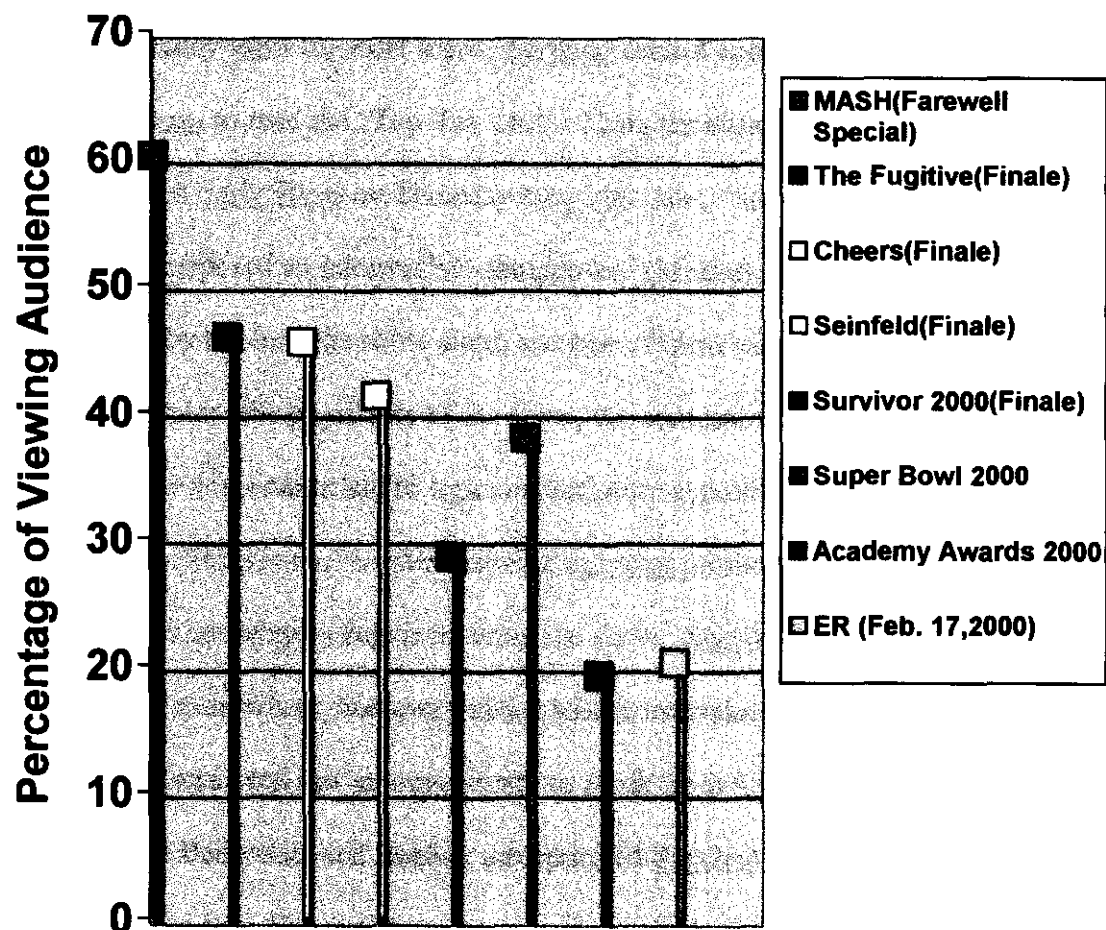
Top Five Most Popular Episodes in TV History vs. Survivor 2000 "Finale"



Source: (Moore; Levin)

Chart 3

Nielson Rating for Survivor "Finale" vs. Other Highly Rated Shows



Source: (Moore; Levin)

Judging by ratings alone, Survivor was a huge success. However, to what extent did publicity, promotion, and coverage of Survivor play a role in its success? According to Francis Anderson of TWA/Chiat Day, Survivor received ratings "equal or better than that of event TV" (Schlosser 12). Perhaps this is because Survivor was promoted like an event. CBS obviously had an extremely effective promotional strategy for the show.

Every Wednesday night the most recent Survivor castoff appeared on Late Night with David Letterman to read the "Top Ten List". Then, the castoff was invited to appear as a guest on CBS's Early Show on Thursday morning. Also, "in order to keep the audience hooked, CBS imposed an information clampdown" (Moore). The cast members were already home by the time the show aired, and one of them was already the million-dollar winner. To protect the popularity of the show, the contestants, crew, and even the family members of the contestants had to sign nondisclosure agreements (Moore).

Perhaps in response to overwhelming Survivor promotion on CBS, other stations, magazines, and newspapers began covering the show. Survivor contestants' pictures were suddenly everywhere, and every major leisure magazine featured articles about the show. Advertisers even saw an opportunity to profit from Survivor's popularity; companies like Budweiser and Reebok incorporated Survivor castoffs into their commercials and ads. Survivor hype became increasingly more prominent as the series progressed. Then, media attention and public excitement hit an all-time high before the August 23rd Survivor "Finale". Local newscasts and entertainment magazine shows covered the show like an event. Bars all over the country held Survivor parties on the night of the final episode. It seemed that any important news took second priority to Survivor news in the week before the final show.

All of the media attention had an immediate impact upon Survivor cast members, as they became instant celebrities. In fact, many of them were offered contracts of some sort. Sean (the doctor), for example, was contacted about a role as a doctor on the soap opera Guiding Light as well as a position as a medical correspondent on the entertainment magazine show Extra. Gervase (the youth basketball coach) was also contacted about a role on a television show—a sitcom called The Hughleys. Stacey (the lawyer) and B.B. (the retired contractor) appeared in Reebok commercials. Jenna and Colleen (the college students) were offered \$100,000 to pose for Playboy (Sigsmond 54-58). Rich (the corporate trainer/winner of the million-dollar prize) appeared on many talk shows and award shows. According to Rich, he has gotten a lot of attention from the public in the form of fan mail and people asking for autographs (Sigsmond 54-58). In most cases, stars of reality television shows only enjoy short-lived celebrity status. And, their moment of stardom fades almost as quickly as it began.

There may be many factors contributing to the public's current fascination with reality television. Is it the same voyeuristic urge that causes people to stop and watch a house burning or an accident scene that draws the audience for shows like Survivor? M.S. Mason believes that the television audience today is simply "taking delight in the misfortunes of others. It's a guilty pleasure. You feel you shouldn't be watching" (Mason). Some media critics even believe that reality television is evidence of a gradual social decline. It is also possible, however, that the television audience is moving away from drama and fantasy to reality. Perhaps people are growing tired of the same manufactured plot lines on dramas and sitcoms. Documentarian Peter Davis suggests that the current television audience has a "hunger for factually oriented fiction and

general voyeuristic passions" (Rosenthal 6). Likewise, according to Tony Karon, "Americans want to watch real people in real situations..." (Karon). Indeed, it makes sense that television viewers can identify with ordinary people more so than with actors. John Ellis proposes that television programming that focuses on ordinary people "is important in maintaining television's sense of intimacy with the lives of its viewers" (112). This identification/intimacy component can, however, give the illusion that reality television is an accurate representation of reality than other television genres.

To what extent does reality television reflect or represent reality? Critics of reality television argue that shows like Survivor, Real World, and even Cops are false representations of reality. Due to the very essence of television itself, it is impossible to view the entire reality of shows like Survivor. First, the camera does not catch everything that happens because it has a limited viewpoint. The cameraperson may even choose not to film boring, routine parts of the entire experience. Secondly, it is the responsibility of the producer to remove the boring, routine parts and create an interesting storyline from the existing footage. Cops producer John Langley says, "Reality is rambling, so we have to find a beginning, middle, and end with some sort of recap" (Mason). Therefore, even documentaries and television news (genres that most accurately represent truth) are only selective reality. In other words, the information the audience receives is only part of the entire picture.

According to Gabriel Weimann, we live in a "mass-mediated world" in which television plays an important role in our lives (4). The danger is that the audience sometimes accepts information and images from television as truth. Weimann refers to television as "reconstructed reality" or "mediated unreality"; television "distorts the true

reality, poorly represents it, focuses only on certain dimensions of the real situation or redefines it for the audience" (359). Weimann believes that much of the distortion of reality occurs during the editing process.

Responding to much criticism on the subject of reality, Survivor producer Mark Burnett explains, "There's nothing real about a group of adventure seekers going to an island. What is real, however, are the emotions the adventure seekers experience. That is one of its fascinations for viewers" (Mason). In a similar argument, Tony Karon claims "Survivor represents real, unscripted politics, whose Darwinian ethic shows humans at their best and worst" (Karon).

It is possible, however, that the producer may create a false representation of the people in shows like Survivor. Rich (the corporate trainer/million-dollar winner from Survivor) felt that he was portrayed in a negative way on the show (Moore). He was characterized as scheming, manipulative, and even slightly evil. This representation of Rich was probably a result of selective editing; the producer chose to use segments of interviews in which Rich talked about his strategy for winning the game. There were probably hours of unused interview footage of Rich, but the majority of what was used made Rich appear to be overly competitive, deceptive, and cruel. According to Rich's personal trainer from Rhode Island, Rich seemed like a completely different person on Survivor. "That's a side of Rich I've never seen before. In real life Rich is a warm, fun guy to be around" (Moore).

Characterization of cast members is only natural when creating a television show. The nature of story telling is to create characters and conflict—usually involving protagonists and antagonists. Many characters were rather one-sided; they may have

been portrayed as a certain character type in order to enhance the story line of the show. In other words, the contestants were at the mercy of the producer as far as their image was concerned. In conclusion, although all of the footage and dialogue on Survivor is real, it may not be an accurate representation of the people and the events that occurred.

Syntactic elements are often used in television to enhance drama. In reality television, however, they contribute to the distortion of reality. In Survivor, for example, there was a dramatic musical soundtrack. There is, of course, no musical sound track in real life. Music in television and movies is often used to evoke certain emotions. For example, dissonant music creates a foreboding feeling and usually indicates that something bad will happen. Music furthered the distortion of reality in Survivor because it was used to arouse emotional responses in viewers.

Camera work and editing techniques also added to the distortion of reality in Survivor. Camerapersons often used extremely close camera angles of contestant's faces or wounds. For example, every time someone was voted off the island, the camera captured extremely close views of contestants with sad facial expressions. The purpose of this was probably to evoke a feeling of sadness in the viewing audience. In addition, slow motion was used excessively in Survivor. Slow motion is most commonly used to create a sense of importance or dramatic impact. A slow motion sequence of a runner, for instance, accentuates the look of determination on the face and the detailed movement of the body. In Survivor, slow motion was used to heighten the drama and tension during physical challenges between contestants.

The game show element of Survivor was perhaps the most significant factor in the distortion of reality. Jeff Probst was the host of Survivor; he served as mediator and

announcer. Probst explained the rules of physical challenges and moderated the tribal council sessions. The physical challenges and tribal council meetings in Survivor were also very reminiscent of a game show. In physical challenges, contestants were required to compete against one another to win prizes like food or to win immunity from being voted off the island. In tribal council meetings, contestants were required to vote against one person, and the person receiving the most votes was asked to leave. To add to the drama of the tribal council, contestants were required to carry torches to and from the meeting, everyone struck a gong as they entered the meeting area, and the losing contestant's torch was extinguished at the end of the meeting.

In addition, the cast of Survivor did not accurately represent society. First, there was not an equal representation of age groups. Ten of the sixteen cast members were 30 years of age or younger. Only three of sixteen were over the age of sixty and the remaining three were 38-39 years old. Also, there was not a realistic representation of different body types. Rich was the only cast member who was slightly overweight. For the most part, everyone (especially the young men and women) was thin, physically fit, attractive, and would be considered an ideal body type. Gender representation was equal; there were eight males and eight females. Race representation, on the other hand, was not very diverse. Two of the sixteen cast members were African Americans; the remaining members were Caucasians.

Whether it was intentional or not, Survivor producers communicated several messages. For example, viewers may have detected many messages or themes about success and survival. First, kindness and honesty may be desirable qualities, but ultimately these characteristics are a sign of weakness. When it comes to winning or

advancing oneself, sneaky, manipulative, competitive people like Rich will be more successful. Rich won because he developed a strategy from the very beginning; he created a voting alliance with Rudy, Susan, and Kelly. The alliance eliminated other contestants by casting all four of their votes against the same person. According to Susan (the truck driver and one of the final four contestants) Survivor "is a game. But, the game reflects real life...America is run on alliances." Likewise, producer Mark Burnett describes Survivor as "an extreme version of an office or a large family" (The Final Survivor). This message may be deceptive because in many real life situations people can relax and work together to achieve a common goal. Also, there is not always one winner in real life. The motivation in Survivor is to win a million dollars by being the last person left; the basic nature of the show requires that cast members be competitive. In this type of situation, characters like Rich are usually more successful.

There was also some sexual content in Survivor. The majority of female and male cast members were young and attractive, and they wore little clothing on the island. Rich appeared naked in a few episodes. On occasion, others also decided to wear nothing in front of the cameras. In one episode, a group of contestants sat around a campfire and had conversations about sex and sexual experiences. There were many implications that Greg (the Brown University graduate) and Colleen (the college student) were having sex. Also, there was innuendo of a homosexual relationship between openly gay Rich and Greg. Finally, the producer set up a situation between two of the contestants that was sexually suggestive. There was a reward for two of the cast members (Sean and Jenna) that involved spending the night alone together. They were given an expensive dinner with candlelight and wine and a tent to sleep in with only one bed. The producer was

obviously trying to encourage a romantic situation; however, apparently nothing romantic happened between Sean and Jenna.

There were some messages about marriage and parenting as well. In fact, many of the cast members came from non-traditional family backgrounds. The producer decided to include conversations about these family situations in a few episodes. Twenty-two year-old, single mother Jenna talked about her two small children. Openly gay Rich talked about being a single gay parent. At one point, host Jeff Probst notified Gervase that his girlfriend back in Philadelphia had successfully delivered his baby. Gervase told other cast members that it was his fourth child out of wedlock. The producer also decided to include a scene in which Rudy (72 year-old former Navy SEAL) commented that having children out of wedlock was not acceptable when he was younger. Finally, there was a scene in which some of the cast members discussed Gervase's family situation and the responsibilities associated with taking care of children.

Examining messages and themes in reality television is increasingly important, as more reality shows appear each season. There seems to be a consensus among experts concerning the impact of reality television. According to many media researchers and critics, reality television is more than a passing craze. According to Robert Thompson, director of the Center for the Study of Popular Television at Syracuse University, "The genie has finally been let out of the bottle. After the summer of 2000, there will never be another day in any of our lives where there won't be some of this kind of programming on television" (Sigesmund 54-58). NBC's West Coast President Scott Sassa also believes in the significance of reality television. Sassa says "Reality [television] is not just a fad; it's a trend that will be around for a while" (Ault 27).

In conclusion, reality television is popular for a variety of reasons. First, reality programs have taken on a new and interesting format in recent years. Also, these programs are heavily promoted and advertised. Finally, there is an identification or intimacy component that attracts people to shows like Real World and Survivor.

Television is a pervasive and powerful medium in today's society. As a result, many viewers search for reaffirmation through television. According to Niklas Luhmann, "Whatever we know about our society, or indeed about the world in which we live, we know through the mass media" (Luhmann 1). Television can be a wonderful resource for learning. Likewise, it can be a great source of entertainment, identification and reaffirmation. Nevertheless, it is the viewer's responsibility to recognize and distinguish between the different functions of television.

As we have discovered, television does not always accurately represent reality. Therefore, the key to differentiating between true reality and television reality is to maintain an awareness that television is a selective reality. Like music and art, television is merely a reflection of real life.

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